

Historical Gardens in Japan

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Garden of Golden Temple of Kyoto

Introduction

Japanese gardens are fascinating for many reasons, including aspects of art, architecture, science, engineering, history, philosophy and horticulture. The Japanese garden tradition goes back to the period where advanced methods of rice production were introduced in Japan, roughly in the 3rd century. While my interest in Japanese gardens is great, my knowledge about Japanese gardens is not sufficient to go into particular details. Take this lecture as an introduction to and opening of a treasure, which can give you professional inspiration in many ways. If you have the chance, I recommend you to visit Japan and learn about Japanese gardens.

When designing a garden, you may follow Japanese design principles, either conscious or unconsciously. Have you already planned gardens with stones, water elements, wounded plants (like *Corallorhiza innominata*) or even Bonsai trees. Everywhere in Europe you can find the “sakura tree” or “*kerria japonica*”, a tree with which I will start my introduction to Japanese historical gardens. Japanese people think very much in terms of phenology, that means they care a lot about the flowering of certain plants. The indication of spring is the cherry blossom called “sakura” tree. The flowering is the reason for many parties outside, where people drink Sake (rice wine) and enjoy the defeat of winter. The rising of Japanese garden tradition is deeply connected with the introduction of improved methods in rice production and horticulture. The sequence of various steps in rice cultivation finds its correspondence in the garden. Particular plants - like *Rhododendron* for the starting – can indicate the right time for certain works.

The cherry blossom is similar to a slow wave. It starts in Kyushu in the South of Japan at around March 20th, and rolls slowly over the country, until it finally reaches Hokkaido the Northern Island at around May 10th. Just now sakura parties are held probably in Sendai, a town north of Tokyo. If you have Satellite TV, watch the Japanese news and you will

definitely know it. It was a surprising experience to recognise that even people in Tokyo care so much for the flowering.

Another sign of spring are the large parks of Rhododendron, one in close neighbourhood of the University of Tokyo. Just in March this park is crowded with masses looking for the hundreds of colours in which the Rhododendrons are flowering. While this little park is crowded during the two or three weeks of Rhododendron blossom in March, it is almost empty during the rest of the year. In close connection with the flowers are also the festivals, which bring together the population of a village or town district and sometimes parks where in particular designed to give an utmost glance to a ceremony.

Japanese people appreciate very much the scenery of landscapes. When trees are flowering the contrasting variations in the landscape will reach a maximum. People usually take a holiday during this time, also called golden week, at the end of April to enjoy the colours of nature. Next peak will be in autumn, when not the flowers, but leaves show their colours. In November every Japanese has to go out into nature to enjoy this moment. It seems to me, that the Japanese spirit is perhaps more oriented towards the visual sense, the scenery, than the European.

One reason for the “visual way” might be the written language. Japanese people were influenced by Chinese and Korean people since about 2000 years, who introduced the “Kanji” writing to Japan. In Kanji there do not exist letters like in the Roman alphabet but “pictures” or symbols with a particular meaning, like a natural event or an emotion. The “abstract way” of European people gives rather a meaning to everything, but this meaning can differ in various interpretations.

In practically every case a special situation is indicated by a Japanese garden. But this special situation can vary a lot according to the people standing behind the Japanese garden. There are many “Japanese gardens” nowadays in Europe or in America, but these gardens have as much to do with Japanese culture like the Minaret in Lednice with Islamic belief. However, many elements that traditionally exist in Japanese gardens became very popular in Europe in recent times and Japanese garden tradition is most important for current European garden design.

All kind of “pendula” (like *betula pendula*) or “contorta” (*coryllus avellana contorta*) became popular in Europe in the 1970s. The “bonsai” tradition in China and Japan has a history of several thousands years. China, in old times the big brother of Japan, has a continued tradition of civilisation of 4000 years, while a separate Japanese culture developed with the introduction of rice (approximately in the 3rd century after Christ). Approximately in the 1980s increasingly more water was introduced to garden design in Europe. Artificial pools in even tiny gardens have since long their pendants in Asia. Rocks and stones are another feature of Japanese gardens, in most cases also connected with water. Today many of these elements are so usual in garden design, that they no longer can be considered as “Japanese”.

The Japanese gardens developed primarily during the last 1000 years. Usually a place of warship was slowly developed into a garden. The maintenance work in the Japanese garden is much higher than in most other gardens as the many details become very important and need daily care. Large Japanese gardens are almost all associated with temples or with residences of the previous daimios or feudal lords. I believe that the introduction of Buddhism was also most important for the development of Japanese gardens. Gardens in European styles only developed after the opening of Japan in the Meiji period at the end of the 19th century. For

example, I did not find an English garden in Japan, while the new town of Tsukuba, which was mainly constructed during the 1970s has a lot of Western park design.



Shinto Priest holding a wedding ceremony

In the period previous to Buddhism there was Shinto believe, an animistic religion. Japan is the divine land where the children of the sun climbed down to Earth. The Japanese emperor is the successor of the Gods and also the religious leader of Shinto believe. When Buddhism came to Japan, there was first resistance and then an arrangement between the two religions. There is no contradiction of being a Shinto and a Buddhist at the same time, which could be difficult to understand for Christians. During the first half of the second millennium, Japan was continuously in a war situation. No single feudal lord could win the power. Catholic missionaries from Portugal came to Southern Japan in the 16th century and some of daimios became Christian believers. Some of them because of opportunism as the Portuguese people could give access to guns and military advantage. After the unification of Japan in the 17th century Christianity was forbidden in Japan and the country isolated itself for 250 years, where European contacts were limited to trade with Dutch people on a small island, close to Nagasaki.

Marc Keane (1997) describes historical gardens in Japan in six phases, where a different philosophy was dominant.

- 1) Spirit of Nature: In Shinto belief, similar to the gods of the old Romans living in trees, Japanese gods were particular islands, trees or rocks, all elements that can be found in Japanese gardens. This period lasted until the 8th century.
- 2) Poetry in Paradise: Thereafter, aristocrats started to generate their own gardens according to expectations they had from paradise. Principles of Buddhism like Yin and Yang were introduced into garden design. This period lasted until the 12th century
- 3) Art of emptiness: With the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of the samurai class (warriors) garden design was modified. Zen Buddhism influenced this kind of design. This garden was not intended to be a place for activity, but a place for meditation. This period lasted until the 16th century
- 4) Spiritual passage: In the second half of the 16th century the tea ceremony developed. It is a stage for physical and mental preparations for entering the teahouse, a place of reflection and a source of new power.

- 5) Private niches: In the long lasting period of peace in the Edo period (1600 to 1868), the samurai class lost influence and wealthy urban merchants became the dominant class of Japanese society. Typically these gardens are very small.
- 6) Collector parks: provincial daimios demonstrated their power and wealth in these parks. Motives of history were laid out about the garden and walking through the park was similar to visiting another country (Chinese motives) or another time (old Japan).

We can see, that the origin of Japanese gardens was widely independent from the development of European gardens, while the last kind of Japanese historical gardens showed a certain harmonisation of the motives.

Samurai warriors, long time the privileged class of Japan, had the wish for peace and relaxing from stress in the gardens, which were used for meditation and mental cleaning and not physical activities. In particular the development of tea ceremony, closely related to the teahouse in the garden, can be considered as a way of sophisticated psychological treatment for the consequences of permanent civil wars.



House in the park typically used for tea ceremony

Outline Natural Disasters and Historical Gardens:

Today I am accompanied by planning and architect students from the Technical University in Vienna interested in avoiding natural hazards by improving site location and advancing housing design principles in high risk areas. I will make an assumption that these students can learn a lot from their colleagues in Japan that designed gardens in old time. Japan is a country very vulnerable and prone to natural disasters. The beginning of Japanese garden tradition was centred by religion and spiritual believe. The adverse natural forces, like torrents, hang gliding, taifun, tsunamis or earthquake were always present and considered to be the activity of daemons. The location of a garden was undertaken very carefully to avoid the risk to a maximum, distant to rivers with possible flooding and if situated in hilly terrain, always protected by forests or other vegetation around. In many cases dangerous places had a ban as forbidden ones, functioning similar to hazardous zone planning. The level of care was many times higher than that of any other kind of land. Gardens and temples were a unity and working as a gardener was a kind of religious activity. No erosion plot could develop here, due to the daily control of the gardeners. Unfortunately, the situation is different in the remote areas of Japan today where we find since several decades an exodus of the young

people. Labour force is lacking for cultivation and environmental control. Therefore we can expect the risk for the remaining population to be considerably higher than what it was under conditions of regular maintenance.



Japanese Garden in Tokyo: inside controlled planning of nature, outside economic-technical development

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Appendix: Timetable of Japanese Gardens (Reference R. Cheetham 2001)

Western Date	Period	Japanese Gardens	Other Events in Japan
10000 B.C. 300 B.C.	Jomon (c.10000 - c.300 B.C.)		Wet rice agriculture developed
200 B.C. 100 B.C. -----	Yayoi (300 B.C. - A.D. 300)		Bronze and iron tools Wheel-thrown pottery Bronze bells (dōtaku)
200 A.D. 300 A.D.	Kofun (300 - 552)		Haniwa figures Burial mounds constructed Yamato-kuni, clan system(uji) Imperial line probably emerges
400 A.D. 500 A.D.	Asuka (552 - 710)		558 Buddhism introduced 574-622 Shotoku-taishi regent
600 A.D. 700 A.D.	Nara (710 - 794)	Chinese garden art introduced to Japan via Buddhism	645-649 Taika Reforms 701 Taiho Codex 712 Kojiki completed 729 Nihonshoki completed 741 kokubunji established 749 Manyōshū completed Development of shinden architecture
800 A.D. 900 A.D.	Heian (794 - 1185)	Morohajinja, Kyoto	774-835 Kukai (founder of Shingon sect) (development of kana) 942-1017 Genshin (advanced Jodo 'Pure Land' sect)
1000 A.D. 1100 A.D.		1053 Byodoin, Fushimi 1117 Motsuji, Hiraizumi 1130 Hokongoin, Kyoto 1150 Joruridera, Kyoto 1180 Daijoin, Nara	c. 1000 Genji monogatari Sakuteiki 1133-1212 Honen-shonin; founds Jodo school (1175) 1147-1199 Minamoto no Yoritomo; first shogun (1192) 1173-1262 Shinran Shonin; founds Jodo-shinshu
1200 A.D. 1300 A.D.	Kamakura (1185 - 1392)	1264-1287 Nanzenin, Kyoto 1327 Zuisenji, Kamakura 1339 Saihoji, Kyoto 1339 Tenryuji, Kyoto 1394 Rokuonji (Kinkakuji), Kyoto	1200-1253 Dogen Zenshi; transmits Zen sect 1222-1282 Nichiren; founds Hokkeshu sect Development of castle towns 1274-1281 Mongol invasion of Kyushu 1275-1351 Musō Sōseki (Kokushi); Zen priest and garden designer; Sumi-e ink painting 1358-1408 Ashikaga Yoshimitsu; shogun, arts patron 1378 Shogunate moves to Muromachi Shoin architecture developed
1400 A.D.	Muromachi/Ashikaga (1392 - 1573)		1436-1490 Ashikaga Yoshimasa Senzui narabi ni yagyo no zu (garden text)

		1482 Jishoji (Ginkakuji), Kyoto 1499 Ryoanji, Kyoto	1467-1477 Onin Wars 1491 Shinjuan
1500 A.D.	Momoyama (1573 - 1603)	1509-1513 Daisenin, Kyoto Ryogenin, Kyoto Joeiji, Yamaguchi prefecture Nanshuj, Sakai-shi 1598 Sanboin, Kyoto	1521 Sen no Rikyu born; tea-master 1534-1582 Oda Nobunaga 1536-1598 Toyotomi Hideyoshi mid-1500's tea culture development 1542-1616 Tokugawa Ieyasu 1549 Francisco de Xavier; missionary arrives 1590 Hideyoshi reunites islands, bringing peace 1592-1595 Hideyoshi invades Korea
1600 A.D.	Tokugawa/Edo (1603 - 1868)	1601-1623 Nijo Castle, Kyoto Fushinan, Omote Senke, Kyoto 1615 Katsurariyu, Kyoto 1628 Nanzenji, Kyoto 1629 Konchiin, Kyoto 1632 Hamarikyū, Kyoto 1632-1641 Suizenji, Kumamoto 1633 Sento Goshō, Kyoto 1636 Daitokuji, Kyoto Shisendo, Kyoto 1648 Ura Senke, Kyoto 1652 Shugakuin , Kyoto 1656 Manshuin, Kyoto 1660 Isoen, Kagoshima 1674 Chishakuin 1673-1681 Entsuiji , Kyoto 1680 Honenin, Kyoto 1690 Ninnaji, Kyoto	1579-1647 Kobori Enshū; tea master, garden designer 1603 Ieyasu moves shogunate to Edo 1615 Most castles destroyed 1617 Yoshiwara entertainment quarters established machiya architecture developed Kabuki theatre Bunraku puppet theatre Ukiyo-e woodblock prints Iemoto system developed 1657 Edo destroyed by fire
1700 A.D.		1700 Ritsurin Koen, Takamatsu 1702-1716 Rikugien, Tokyo Shinjuan, Kyoto Kohōan, Kyoto 1751-1772 Hirayama Soyo, Chiran	
1800 A.D.	Meiji (1868 - 1911)	1800 Shigaki, Okinawa 1841-1842 Kairakuen, Mito (Ibaraki) Many stroll gardens converted to public parks. (c. 1870-1890) 1895 Murinan 1895-1914 Heian Jingu , Kyoto	1858 Commodore Perry forces commercial ports open 1862 Embassy sent to Europe 1867 Tokugawa shogunate falls 1868 Meiji Restoration 1889 Meiji Constitution 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese war
1900 A.D.	Taishō (1912 - 1925) Shōwa (1926 - 1988) Heisei (1989 - Present)	1915 Meiji Jingu, Tokyo 1938 Tōfukuji, Kyoto 1961 Gyokudo Bijutsukan, Ōme 1961 Zuihōin, Kyoto 1967 Tenrikyō, Tokyo 1970 Keio Plaza Hotel, Kyoto 1977 Sōseien, Kurume (Fukuoka)	1904-1905 Russo-Japanese war 1912 Great Kanto earthquake 1914 Japan enters WW I 1937 Manchuria invaded 1941 Attack on Pearl Harbor 1945 Atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima & Nagasaki; Capitulation follows 1951 Peace Treaty signed